

The Successful Novelist

A Lifetime of Lessons about Writing and Publishing

DAVID MORRELL



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Testament (1975)

Last Reveille (1977)

The Totem (1979)

Blood Oath (1982)

The Brotherhood of the Rose (1984)

The Fraternity of the Stone (1985)

The League of Night and Fog (1987)

The Fifth Profession (1990)

The Covenant of the Flame (1991)

Assumed Identity (1993)

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American Fiction, American Myth: Essays by Philip Young

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Dedication

To Stirling Silliphant, Philip Klass/William Tenn, and John Barth, the writers who, in chronological order, taught me most about fiction writing

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First Day of Class

When I was seventeen, I realized that, more than anything, I wanted to be a fiction writer. I made the decision rather suddenly between 8:30 and 9:30 p.m. on the first Friday of October, 1960. How can I be so specific? Because that was when the classic TV series *Route 66* premiered. I vividly remember the power with which the show's opening sequence struck me—two hip young men in a Corvette convertible driving along a highway while a piano jazz theme pulsed and the show's title zoomed into the foreground.

At the time, I was a troubled teenager who drowsed through my high school classes (except English) and then went home to watch television until the stations went off the air at 1 a.m. My school's principal once summoned me to his office, thrust a finger at me, and announced that I'd never amount to anything. How ironic that a television program became my salvation. *Route 66* was then the main highway connecting much of the United States, so its name made a perfect title for a show about two young men who traveled the country in search of America and themselves. Their search became my search. I identified with the characters. (One had recently lost his father; the other had been raised in an orphanage. When I was four, my mother put me in an orphanage because she couldn't support the two of us after my father had died in World War II.) I loved the colorful "Beat" way they talked. I hung on every twist in the plots. Eager to learn everything I could about *Route 66*, I studied each episode's credits and noticed that almost every script was written by a man with the distinctive name Stirling Silliphant. The most bizarre notion took possession of me. Wouldn't it be great, I thought, to have made up all those gripping stories and to have invented that wonderful dialogue? I'd always had an abundant imagination, filled with daydreams, but this was the first time it ever occurred to me that my imagination could be productive.

A directionless seventeen-year-old boy suddenly had a purpose that he could never have dreamt of a few weeks earlier. Noticing that *Route 66* was produced by Screen Gems, a division of Columbia Pictures, I went to the local library—this was in a modest-sized city called Kitchener in Ontario, Canada—where I asked a librarian how I could find the address for Columbia Pictures. Armed with that address, I sent a handwritten letter (I didn't yet know how to type) to the mysterious Silliphant, informing him that he had inspired me to want to be a writer—that basically I wanted to be *him*.

Whatever I expected, it certainly wasn't a reply within a week, in the form of a typed, two-page, single-spaced letter in which he apologized for taking so long to get back to me. (He'd been on a boat at sea when my letter arrived, he explained.) He was flattered that I admired his work. He was delighted that he'd motivated me to try to do what *he* did. Unfortunately, he was far too busy to critique work by beginning writers.

But he did offer some advice. “If you want to be a writer, the secret is to write, write, write, and keep writing,” he said. “Eventually you’ll find other people who want to be writers. You’ll trade ideas with them. You’ll critique one another’s work. Keep writing. When you think you have something of merit, send it out. Chances are, the first items you submit won’t be accepted, but you can’t be discouraged. Keep writing. One day, if you have something of promise to say, somebody somewhere will see it and become excited and help you. It’s just that simple,” he concluded, “and that terribly difficult.”

I never received better advice. (That letter is framed beside my desk, incidentally.) Taking a hard look at myself, I realized that desire alone wasn’t going to get me anywhere—I needed to learn how to put words and stories together. I finished high school and went to college, amazing myself as much as my high school principal. My mother and stepfather worked in a furniture factory, though, and they didn’t have the money for my tuition. To pay it, I had to work summers at god-awful jobs. One involved twelve-hour night shifts at a factory that made Styrofoam containers. I wore earplugs, goggles, and a mask over my nose and mouth while I shoved leftover chunks of Styrofoam into a gigantic grinder that pulverized them. The roar from the grinder (affectionately called “the snow machine”) could be heard three blocks from the factory. I had a summer-long ringing in my ears and was constantly coughing up bits of plastic.

But that job was nothing compared to the one I had the *next* summer at a metal-molding factory where I made car fenders. Wearing thick gloves that became shredded by the end of each shift, I would grab a large sheet of metal, shove it into a stamping machine, press a button with my foot, cause a huge weight to come down on the metal, pull out what was now a car fender, and grab another sheet. For safety and to speed the process, my wrists were shackled to the machine so that when the weight came down, it tugged a cable that yanked my hands out of the way. One morning, the factory’s personnel manager, who used to call me to his office to have literary discussions, decided to put me on a safer job. An hour later, the worker who had replaced me at the machine lost his hands when the cables failed and didn’t pull him free.

I mention those jobs to emphasize my determination. Now that I knew what I wanted to be, I was prepared to do anything to make it happen. I got through those brutal summers by telling stories to myself while I worked. Although I was inspired by a screenwriter, I couldn’t find any universities that offered courses in screenwriting (although these days, such courses are everywhere), so I majored in English and American literature. The then-small institution I went to (St. Jerome’s College at the University of Waterloo in Canada) offered only one fiction writing course. But in retrospect, I’m glad there weren’t more, because I’d have attended them all and missed various literature courses. Many of the important lessons I learned about writing fiction came from analyzing great novels. To feed my writing, I realized, I needed to read in order to discover how the experts achieved their effects.

Meanwhile, I wrote television scripts and sent them to various programs, but the scripts always came swiftly back with a note informing me that unsolicited manuscripts weren’t welcome. Translation—get an agent. But how on Earth was I supposed to do that when most agents wouldn’t accept writers without experience? So

I wrote short stories and sent them to various magazines. Those manuscripts always came swiftly back also, accompanied with a form letter announcing something like, “Your story doesn’t suit our present needs.”

Eventually, I was forced to conclude that the odds against earning a living as a writer were terrible and that a day job would be a good idea. Why not get a graduate degree in American literature? I thought. Become a professor. Write fiction when I wasn’t teaching. I was encouraged that Stirling Silliphant was a novelist as well as a screenwriter. So after applying to a number of doctoral programs, I went to Pennsylvania State University, where I met Philip Klass (his pen name is William Tenn), the first professional writer I’d ever talked to. Klass, who was part of the Golden Age of science fiction in the 1950s, generously put me through a crash course in technique. And with a sense of him looking encouragingly over my shoulder, in 1968 I began a novel about a disaffected Vietnam veteran named Rambo who finds himself in a private war with a small-town police chief. I called it *First Blood*.

That novel was begun eight years after the premiere of *Route 66*. I was now twenty-five. But I still wasn’t confident about my writing abilities. After numerous drafts that I struggled through when I wasn’t studying for classes, I decided that I’d set myself an impossible goal. I put the frustrating manuscript in a drawer and began what seemed a much more sensible project: my dissertation on the contemporary American writer John Barth. I remember a snowy night in Buffalo when Barth and I, having interrupted one of my interviews with him, were driving to a State University of New York function that he needed to attend. Somehow he’d heard (probably from my dissertation director) that I was working on a novel. He asked me how it was going, and I replied that I’d abandoned it, that I’d finally admitted to myself that I didn’t have what it took to be a published fiction writer.

That was in 1969, *nine years* after the premiere of *Route 66*. The following year I finished the dissertation, and with time on my hands before I moved to the University of Iowa to start teaching American literature, I happened across the interrupted novel. To my surprise, it somehow didn’t read so badly. The next thing I knew, I was cutting and rearranging, then moving the story forward. In June of 1971, I finally finished it and sent it to an agent Philip Klass had introduced me to, Henry Morrison, but I was still so uncertain that I also sent a typescript of my dissertation.

I started teaching summer school, *finished* teaching summer school, and pretty much gave up expecting a reply when Morrison called to say that he’d sold my book. Assuming that he was talking about my dissertation, I needed a minute to realize that he meant *First Blood*, for which I would receive the lofty advance of \$3,500. That wasn’t going to make me rich, but then neither was being an assistant professor—my second-year salary was \$13,500. The advance seemed even smaller when Morrison reminded me that I needed to pay a chunk of it in federal/state taxes, and of course an agent’s fee would be deducted. But the amount I earned didn’t matter as much as the fact of the sale. Eleven years after the first episode of *Route 66*, I finally became a professional writer. In my twenty-eighth year, the dream of a seventeen-year-old was fulfilled, and it happened exactly as Silliphant had said it would.

I’ve written millions of words since then: twenty novels, two novelizations, two

books of non-fiction (not counting this one), a Christmas fable, two collections of short stories (with enough stories left over to fill a third volume), several screenplays and TV scripts, a comic book series, numerous essays and reviews as well as forewords and afterwords to books by others. To my surprise, thirty-six years have sped by. I'm in my fourth decade as a professional writer. Although I resigned my professorship in 1986, the teacher in me remains strong and finally urged me to try yet another type of writing:*about* writing. In my long career, I accumulated a great many lessons—how to do things on the page and, equally important, how *not* to do things—a lifetime's worth of tips that I'm eager to pass along.

But please don't expect a magic formula that'll make books fall out of your head and automatically give you a wide readership. There isn't an easy way. True, on occasion a writer comes along who calculates an approach and a subject matter that turn out to be vastly popular. Nicholas Sparks (*Message in a Bottle*) is a good example. Some years ago at the *Los Angeles Times* Festival of Books, he spent a half hour with me, explaining his theory that each genre tends to have two writers who dominate it, with room for a third. For the legal thriller, there were John Grisham, Scott Turow, and the current contender. For the female private-eye novel, there were Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, and the current contender. You get the idea. By process of elimination, Sparks concluded that there was only *one* leader in the male romance genre, i.e., romances written by men for a female audience: Robert James Waller (*The Bridges of Madison County*). With a slot available, Sparks decided to give it a try and was vastly successful.

I don't recommend that you attempt this kind of calculation. Maintaining a career is hard to begin with but becomes even harder if you arbitrarily choose a type of fiction that happens to be currently fashionable. Let's say you take a year to write the book. It takes another year to publish the book properly. By the time your calculated effort is released, the culture you're trying to appeal to will have moved on. Interests might have changed. There's a risk that you'll be seen as irrelevant or old-fashioned. Since you can't predict how long trends will last, don't bother trying to be part of one. The only reason to write a story is that it grabs you and won't let go until you put it on paper. If there's a formula, it's based on passion and commitment. That won't guarantee a wide readership, but it *will* guarantee the satisfaction of writing a story that matters to you: the ultimate reward.

In my own case, I created one of the most recognizable characters of the late twentieth century: Rambo. But the huge commercial success that Rambo brought me was the farthest thing from my mind when I wrote *First Blood*. All I cared about was the compulsion that gripped me each day, the excitement of describing a Vietnam veteran's collision with a small-town police chief and the miniature Vietnam War that resulted. Until that time, few hardbacks had depicted that much action. My agent and I were sure that only a paperback publisher would risk accepting the book. To our surprise, a hardback publisher (M. Evans and Co., Inc.) brought it out in 1972, and just about every major newspaper and magazine reviewed it, usually favorably. Who could have figured?

The movie based on the novel faced its own obstacles. Throughout the rest of the

1970s, numerous film companies tried to adapt it but failed. That turned out to be good for the project because, after America was forced from Vietnam, angry feelings about the war meant that films with a Vietnam background wouldn't attract an audience unless they were overtly political, as was 1978's *Coming Home*. Only in 1982, when attitudes toward the war became less bitter, did *First Blood* finally reach the screen. No one associated with the production anticipated its success. Back in 1968, I couldn't possibly have predicted that Rambo would become an international phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s. There were too many cultural variables in the future that couldn't be imagined and controlled. Don't try to outsmart the market. Just write a story you feel passionate about and do it as well as you possibly can.

With that disclaimer out of the way—there isn't any magic formula for achieving success—let's get started. The sections of this book are arranged so that they lead you through the process I follow when putting a novel or a story together, from getting the idea to focusing it, then doing the research and making the necessary choices among viewpoints and structures, then deciding what should be on that all-important first page, and so on. I'll discuss the psychology of being a fiction writer, the unique pressures and problems that face me every day. I'll use examples from my work to illustrate mistakes that I made or problems that I had trouble solving. I'll talk about Rambo and the movies, about the cultural phenomenon of the character, and about the challenges of dealing with Hollywood. I'll explain about getting published, about the business of writing, about contracts and money management. Basically, I'll try to put you in my head and teach you how I survived for so many years in this uncertain, competitive profession. For this updated edition of *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*, I added a major new section about publicity and marketing. I also expanded numerous portions of the original text, adding new material about topics such as what to consider when naming characters. My hope is that if you face the obstacles I encountered, you'll learn from my example how to overcome those obstacles more easily than I did, creating better fiction in the process.

LESSON ONE

Why Do You Want To Be a Writer?

When I teach at writers' conferences, I always begin by asking my students, "Why in heaven's name would you want to be writers?" They chuckle, assuming that I've made a joke. But my question is deadly sober. Writing is so difficult, requiring such discipline, that I'm amazed when someone wants to give it a try. If a student is serious about it, if that person intends to make a living at it, the commitment of time and energy is considerable. It's one of the most solitary professions. It's one of the few in which you can work on something for a year (a novel, say) with no certainty that your efforts will be accepted or that you'll get paid. On every page, confidence fights with self-doubt. Every sentence is an act of faith. Why would anybody want to do it?

The usual answer I get is, "For the satisfaction of being creative." The students nod, relieved that this troubling line of thought is over. But in fact the subject has barely been started. I rephrase my question, making it less threatening. "Why do you want to be writers?" This time I tell my students I don't want to hear about the joy of creativity. Squirms. Glances toward the ceiling or toward the floor. Someone is honest enough to say, "I'd like to earn the kind of money Stephen King does." Someone else chuckles. "Who wouldn't?" We're on our way.

Money. We're so used to hearing about the fantastic advances that writers like King, John Grisham, Tom Clancy, and Patricia Cornwell receive that many would-be writers think generous advances are the norm. The truth is that in the United States, maybe as few as twenty-five hundred fiction writers make a living at it. Every Thursday, in *USA Today's* entertainment section, there's a list of the top fifty best-selling books. Nonfiction is grouped with fiction, hardbacks with paperbacks. Fifty books. A longer list of 150 books is available on that newspaper's website. The lowest book might have sold only a thousand copies nationwide. Seen from this perspective, the figure of twenty-five hundred fiction writers who make a living at it seems huge. A couple of years ago, I came across an article that said the average income for a fiction writer in the United States was \$6,500. I believe it. The inescapable moral, I tell my students, is that anyone who wants to become a writer had better not give up his or her day job.

"Why do you want to be writers?" I repeat. The squirms are more uncomfortable. Someone admits, not in so many words, that it would be neat to be the subject of magazine articles and to appear on the *Today* show. The writer as movie star. We go back to the usual suspects: King, Grisham, Clancy, and Cornwell (while we're at it, let's add Danielle Steele and Mary Higgins Clark— there aren't many brand names). Again, the *USA Today* list gives us perspective. Scan the names of the top fifty authors. I doubt that more than twenty will be familiar to you. Even fewer writers are famous than earn a living at it. More important, while I can't imagine anyone foolish

enough to turn down money, I have trouble understanding why someone would want to be famous. As Rambo's creator, I have experience in that regard, and if your idea of a good time is to be forced to get an unlisted phone number, swear your friends to secrecy about your address, and make sure your doors are locked because of stalkers, you're welcome to it. One of my devoted fans talks to my dead mother and to the brother I never had. Another was never in the military, but having convinced himself that he's Rambo, he tried to sue me for stealing his life. In a connection I have yet to understand, he also tried to sue the governor of New York and the Order of the Raccoon, which I thought was an organization that existed only in Jackie Gleason's television show, *The Honeymooners*. Fame's dangerous, not to mention shallow and fleeting. I'm reminded of what a once-important film producer said to me before his fortunes turned for the worse: "Just remember, David. Nobody lasts forever."

In that regard, consider a travel essay that my journalist friend John Whalen once wrote for the *Washington Times* in which he described his visit to Tarzana, California. That town, twenty miles north of Los Angeles, got its name because Edgar Rice Burroughs, the creator of Tarzan, owned a ranch there. In the 1920s, Burroughs started subdividing the property into residential lots until finally the community of Tarzana was created. In a bizarre odyssey, John wandered the streets of the town, trying to find someone who knew where Burroughs had lived. "Edgar who?" and "I don't read books" were typical of the answers he received. Few people knew that Tarzana was named after Tarzan, and some didn't even know who Tarzan was. After repeated efforts, John came to a small low house concealed behind a big tree, crammed between a furniture store and a car-repair shop. The house turned out to be where Burroughs wrote his Tarzan stories. The urn containing the author's ashes was buried under the tree, but no one knew exactly where. After taking some photographs, John paused at the gate and peered back at the obscured house. "I felt very strange standing in the middle of a town named after the fictional creation of a man whose name was totally unknown to most of the people living there."

So if money and notoriety aren't acceptable answers to "Why do you want to be a writer?", and if I won't accept the easy answer, "Because of the satisfaction of being creative," what's left? My students squirm deeper into their chairs. At this point, I mention someone who seems extremely unlikely in this context: comedian/filmmaker Jerry Lewis. The students chuckle once more, assuming that this time I've definitely made a joke. But I haven't. Years ago, Jerry Lewis taught a seminar in comedy at the University of Southern California. A hot ticket. How did Jerry decide which of the many students who applied for the course actually got to attend? Did he audition them? Did he ask for tapes of their performances? Did he read printed versions of their routines? Not at all. He merely asked for an answer to the following question: "Why do you want to be a comedian?" And there was only one answer he would accept.

"Because I need to be. Because there's something in me so nagging and torturing and demanding to get out that I absolutely need to make people laugh."

Why do you want to be a writer?

Because you need to be.

My students glance up and nod, their relieved expressions saying, "Sure."

Right.”They have the contented look they displayed when they decided they wanted to be writers because of the satisfaction of being creative. But we’re still in the land of easy answers. Do they truly understand what “need to be” means? A long time ago when I was a literature professor, a student came to my office and announced that she was going to be a writer. “When was the last time you wrote?” I asked. “Six months ago,” she answered. I politely suggested that she might consider another line of work.

Writers write. It’s that basic. If you just got off an assembly line in Detroit and you’re certain you have the great American novel inside you, you don’t grab a beer and sit in front of the TV. You write. If you’re a mother of three toddlers and at the end of the day you feel like you’ve been spinning in a hamster cage and yet you’re convinced you have a story to tell, you find a way late at night or early in the morning to sit down and write. That’s a version of how Mary Higgins Clark succeeded, by the way. Because she had to. Because something inside her absolutely insisted. A half hour a day. A page a day. Whatever it takes.

Tough stuff. The profession is not for the weak-willed or for the faint of heart. But there’s a payoff, and it has nothing to do with money (although it would be nice if hard work were rewarded), and it certainly has nothing to do with having your name in the newspaper. The satisfaction of being creative? Sure. But only partly and only as it relates to my next and final question: “You need to be a writer. *Why?*” This is the key to the treasure. Why do you absolutely need to be a writer? What’s the source of the uneasiness that nags at you, the compulsion to spin tales and put word after word on a blank page?

That question is one of the most important challenges any would-be writer will ever need to face in his or her creative life. How honest are you prepared to be with yourself? Earlier, I mentioned that when I was a young man learning my craft, I met my first professional writer, an expert in science fiction whose pen name was William Tenn and whose real name is Philip Klass. Klass didn’t like the early stories I showed him because their subject matter was familiar. They weren’t any different from hundreds of other stories he’d read, he told me. The writers who go the distance, he insisted, have a distinct subject matter, a particular approach that sets them apart from everyone else. The mere mention of their names—Faulkner, for example, or Edith Wharton—conjures themes, settings, methods, tones, and attitudes that are unique to them.

How did they get to be so distinctive? By responding to who they were and the forces that made them that way. *Everyone* is unique, Klass told me. No two lives are identical. The writers who discover what sets them apart are the writers with the best chance of succeeding. “Look inside yourself,” Klass said. “Find out who you are. In your case, I suspect that means find out what you’re most afraid of, and that will be your subject for your life or until your fear changes.” But he didn’t mean fear of heights or closed spaces or fire. Those fears were merely versions of much deeper fears, he said. The fear he was talking about was like a ferret gnawing at my soul. The ferret didn’t want to be caught, though. It was going to take all my honesty and introspection to find it and determine what it was.

I eventually called this method “fiction writing as selfpsychoanalysis.” The theory

goes like this—most people become writers because they're haunted by secrets they need to tell. The writers might not know they have secrets, or if they suspect they do, they might not be sure what these mysteries are, but something in each person is bursting to get out, to be revealed. This revelation might relate to traumas that happened to the writers as adults. A lot of young men came back from the Vietnam War wanting to write novels about what they endured in combat, for example. More often, though, the secrets surround things that occurred in childhood and were never understood. To paraphrase Graham Greene, an unhappy childhood can be a gold mine for a fiction writer. Abuse comes to mind, but not necessarily sexual. Any psychological trauma, never adjusted to, can be the impetus for someone to want to be a storyteller. A contentious divorce in which one child went with mom and the other went with dad. Or a large family in which one child never got the attention that the others did. Dickens fits this theory well. After his father went to prison for failing to pay his debts, the young Dickens was taken out of school and forced to be a laborer in a squalid factory. Prisons, oppressed children, and the suffering of the poor are constants in his work.

Hemingway fits this theory, also. His prim hometown of Oak Park, Illinois, was where the saloons ended and the churches began. In his conflicted household, his mother wanted him to wear sissy clothes and play the cello while his father encouraged him to hunt, fish, and play football. His best times were summers spent at a lake in Michigan where the outdoors provided an escape from family disagreements. As soon as Hemingway was old enough, he left his repressive environment, tried to enlist as a soldier in the First World War, was turned down because of weak eyes, and finally got accepted as a Red Cross ambulance driver on the Italian front. His almost immediate duty was to pick up body parts after a massive munitions explosion. A few assignments later, he visited an Italian sentry post where an Austrian mortar killed the Italian soldiers with him and riddled him with shrapnel. While he struggled to reach cover, an enemy machine gun shot him.

The consequence of all this was that Hemingway suffered from what is now termed posttraumatic stress disorder, with symptoms that included insomnia, nightmares, and fear of the dark. But once he had sufficient distance from the war and its effect on him, his imagination returned again and again to those traumas, using them in his first mature stories and novels. From his boyhood on, Hemingway had wanted to be a writer, but his early attempts had been conventional and flat. One of his teachers, Gertrude Stein, had told him to throw it all away and start over. As soon as Hemingway confronted his nightmares, he did start over, using a tense, lean style to communicate the "grace under pressure" that his characters, like himself, struggled to achieve from their tense childhoods onward. Understanding the importance of trauma to a writer, Hemingway once advised a would-be writer to hang himself but to arrange for a friend to cut him down before he died. That way, the would-be writer would have something to put on paper.

As for my own traumas, my father (whom I never knew) died in the Second World War. As I grew up, I keenly missed the affectionate attention of a male authority figure. My feeling of abandonment was reinforced when my mother, in dire financial straits, was forced to put me in an orphanage when I was four. Eventually, she

reclaimed me. Or was the woman who took me from that orphanage the same person who put me in it? Am I adopted? To provide me with a father, she remarried, but my stepfather and I didn't get along. We lived above a bar and a hamburger joint. Drunks fought under our windows. We couldn't afford a telephone, so when my mother needed to make a phone call, she went to a pay phone in the alley below. Once, a stray gunshot shattered the phone booth's window. At night, the arguments between my mother and stepfather were so severe that I fearfully put pillows under my bed covers and made them look as if I slept there. Then I crawled under the bed to sleep where I hoped I'd be protected if anyone came into my room to harm me. I made trouble at school. In grade six, I belonged to a street gang.

An objective observer would realize how disturbed my youth was. But to me, since it was the only reality I knew, my youth was normal. That's the thing about youthful traumas. Most of the time, we don't know they're extraordinary. Only when I was in my twenties did I begin to come to terms with the psychological ordeals of my youth. By then, I was writing fiction, and even when I was dramatizing a metaphoric son in conflict with a metaphoric father (*First Blood*), it was only belatedly that I understood my fascination with the topic. Fathers and sons. The theme shows up in many of my books. I'm still adjusting to the death of the father I never knew, and writing fiction is how I accomplish that—or try to. Come to think of it, the reverence I had for Stirling Silliphant and Philip Klass is close to that of a son for a father.

Consider *your* traumas, or perhaps you don't feel that you've had any. A writer friend once told me that *he* hadn't had any traumas, that his childhood was about as perfect as any child could want, until his father died. He added that comment about his father's death as an aside, something that he gave the impression that he'd gotten over. But his fiction reveals that he's still adjusting to his father's death, for in numerous books, he dramatizes an idealized version of his childhood, showing how much he longs for the perfection that ended when his father died. In a similar fashion, *you* might be unaware of how certain events in your life affected you so strongly that they compel you to want to be a writer. A better sense of the incidents that motivate you could take you farther on your way to reaching the Holy Grail of writers: a subject matter that's your own.

How do you discover what those traumas and that subject matter are? Here's an exercise that I've found to be helpful. People often ask me where my story ideas come from. Repeating a joke by Stephen King, I answer that there's a company in Cleveland or some such place. It's called the Writers Idea Shop, and the first of every month, it sends me a box of ideas. This usually gets a laugh, after which I say that, actually, ideas swarm around me all the time—from newspapers, magazines, and television, from casual comments that my wife makes, from things my cat does, whatever. This is partially true. But it's a simple answer to a complex question, and only if I feel that the person I'm talking to has the time and is receptive, do I say the following.

My ideas don't come from outside. They come from within—from my daydreams. I'm not referring to the type of daydream that you consciously create: deliberately imagining how wonderful it would be to achieve a coveted goal, for example. Instead, I mean the type of daydream that comes to you spontaneously, an unbidden message

from your subconscious. Basically, the deepest part of you is sending a story to the surface. Pay attention. The primal author in you is at work.

Daydreams come in two types: attractive and repelling. You're at a business meeting or you're driving the kids to school, and all of a sudden, in your imagination, you're on the beach at Cancun. No surprise there. You're bored with what you're doing. Your subconscious transported you to a pleasurable experience. Note how I phrased that statement. Out of boredom, *you* didn't transport yourself. Your subconscious did. You had no control over it. You could strain your imagination all day and still not create as total and sensual an experience as your subconscious did. You don't just see that beach. You hear the waves splashing. You feel the sand beneath you, the heat of the sun on your skin, and the tickle of the breeze in your nostrils. You taste the salt on the rim of your margarita. You smell the sweetness of an approaching afternoon rain shower. It's not like watching a movie in your mind. A movie is apart from you, on a flat screen, presenting only images and sound. *This* is a three-dimensional imaginary experience that totally envelopes you, engaging all your physical senses.

Now let's talk about the other kind of daydream—the repellent one. You're at a business meeting or you're driving the kids to school, and suddenly, in your imagination, as vividly as in the Cancun experience, you're trapped in a terrifying wide-awake nightmare. Interestingly, while most of us would agree that lying on the beach at a luxury resort is a situation we'd like to be in, we don't have the same consensus when it comes to what terrifies us. I have a friend with a phobia about snakes, for example. In contrast, I find snakes kind of interesting. Another friend doesn't like closed spaces whereas they don't bother me a bit. Other things scare me a lot, though. All you need to do is read my fiction to find out what they are.

Consider the implications. It's understandable why the subconscious would transport us from boring, real-life situations into pleasurable fantasies. But why on Earth does the subconscious sometimes transport us from those same boring, real-life situations into fantasies that are terrifying? From one point of view, the mechanism doesn't make sense. From another point of view, though, it makes all kinds of sense, and it parallels my question to my students: "Why do you want to be writers?" "Why do you have spontaneous wide-awake nightmares? And what is the principle of selection by which your subconscious terrifies you in one way while *my* subconscious terrifies me in another?"

We're at the heart of the issue. The difference between fiction writers and civilians is that we make it our life's work to put our daydreams and day-nightmares on paper. Most of the time we don't understand the secrets and demons that our spontaneous imaginings contain. All we feel is that there's something in us demanding to be released in the form of a story. Philip Klass told me, "What you fear is like a ferret gnawing at your soul. The more you try to catch it, the more it tries to hide. You'll only get hints and guesses of what and where it is." To this, I add: Day-nightmares are messages from your subconscious, hinting to you what that ferret is about. They're disguised versions of your secret. They're metaphors for why you want to be a writer.

The breakthrough I had as a writer came one hot August afternoon when I was twenty-five. I'd been writing tired conventional fiction for so long that I was in

creative despair. I desperately wanted to be a writer, but I had no idea why I felt that way or what I wanted to write about. At the end of my creative resources, I gave up—and immediately had the most intense, wide-awake nightmare I’d ever experienced. I was making my way through a sweltering forest. Bushes crowded me. Sweat rolled down my face. I heard noises behind me. At first, I assumed that a squirrel was rooting for something in the underbrush. But as the sporadic crinkle of leaves sounded closer, the sound seemed more and more like cautious footsteps. Someone was in the forest with me. Someone was creeping up on me. I can’t express how vividly I felt that I was actually in that forest—and how fearfully certain I was that someone intended to kill me. As abruptly as it came, the multisensory illusion ended. It was as if I’d had an out-of-body experience. Suddenly, I found myself staring not at a forest but at my desk and the typewriter on it, a blank sheet of paper taunting me. I’d never experienced any other daydream as powerfully. I didn’t understand the process, but I was sure of one thing: I wanted to know what happened next. Thus I began my first true David Morrell short story.

Ever since that long-ago afternoon, I trained myself to pay attention to my daydreams/nightmares, to be aware of them as they’re happening, to wonder why certain imaginary situations are so insistent, and to use the most compelling of them as the inspiration for novels and short stories. After the fact, I learned to realize how the plots that attract me are metaphors for my psyche. That story about a man being hunted in a forest dramatizes the helplessness I felt at that time. What was hunting me? Time, ambition, frustration—name it. In the story, the hero (me) survived by overcoming his fear and maintaining control, a theme that is constant in my work. Another constant theme shows up in my novel *The Brotherhood of the Rose*. There, two orphans are trained by a surrogate father to be killers for a rogue intelligence agency. They don’t kill for money or politics. They do it for love. And when the surrogate father turns against them in order to protect himself, they set out in a fury to get even. Freudian as can be. But I wrote the entire novel before I realized why my subconscious would have compelled me to write about orphans and fathers. The plot was a disguised version of the story of my life.

I want to emphasize the word “disguised.” I’m not suggesting that you write stories that explicitly address your psychological concerns. That would be tedious and mechanical. Plots are at their best when they serve as metaphors for, and not explicit descriptions of, their author’s psychological state. That’s what daydreams are: disguises. More often than not, the author can’t see through them. All the writer knows is that the story insisted on being told, that his or her imagination wouldn’t rest until the images and characters that haunted it were brought into the light. The best stories choose us. We don’t choose them.

I think that the *type* of stories we tell also chooses us. I referred to Stephen King a couple of times. Might as well do it again. Critics often ask him (their tone is sniffingly aloof) why he writes horror. King’s response is, “What makes you think I have a choice?” Exactly. In his book *On Writing*, King describes the brutal poverty of his childhood and the twelve miles he hitchhiked each Saturday to a movie theater that specialized in horror movies, which provided a distraction from his poverty. The horror novels, stories, and comic books he compulsively read fulfilled the same function.

Made-up horror helped him temporarily forget the burdens of life. Is it any surprise that his urge to write led him to tell the kind of stories that gave him relief when he was a boy?

A similar urge led me to write thrillers. When I was a kid, the family arguments drove me from our apartment above the hamburger joint. I went to a crowded bus stop, where I asked someone to give me a nickel. “Mister, I lost my bus fare.” A nickel is what it cost to get a ride on the bus, but fifteen cents is what it cost to get into a movie, which was my goal. So when everybody got on the bus, I hung back and went to another bus stop, where I again begged for a nickel. If the bus stops didn’t get me enough money, I waited outside bars, hoping that drunks would lose coins as they came outside, trying to pocket their money. Often my patience was rewarded. When I finally had my fifteen cents, I then had to beg an adult going into the movie theater to buy a ticket for me (I was only ten, and because it was after dark, I couldn’t get into the theater by myself). I always picked a young couple who didn’t have wedding rings. “Mister, will you please pretend I’m your kid and buy my ticket for me? I promise you’ll never see me again when we’re inside.” The reason I picked unmarried couples was that the woman would look at the man to see how he reacted to a child’s request (that is, what kind of father would this guy be?). Sensing that he was being tested, each man always bought my ticket.

So finally, I was in the theater, which in those days looked like a palace and where I was safe from the family arguments, escaping into the movie on the screen. The films that made the most impression on me were Hitchcock-type thrillers. So is it any wonder that the stories I love to tell are the kind that gave me an escape when I was a kid? And is it any wonder that the fan letters I most treasure are from readers trying to cope with a personal disaster? A divorce, a fire, a flood, a crippling car accident, a loved one’s death, the loss of a job—name the worst thing that happened to you. People trying to survive these things write to thank me for distracting them from their pain, just as I was distracted in that movie theater when I was a troubled child.

Apply this mechanism to yourself. Perhaps you want to write romances or science fiction or mainstream novels. Unlike many critics, I make no distinction in terms of whether any type of fiction is more worthy than any other type. They all offer opportunities for imagination and verbal skills. In this regard, Peter Straub is a model. He wrote *Ghost Story* and *Mystery* with such respect, bringing to those genres such literary honesty, that he showed us the essence of what a ghost story and a mystery are. Any type of story is only a means—what a writer does with it is what matters. You’ll find it revealing if, after asking yourself “Why do I want to be a writer?”, you ask yourself, “Why do I want to write this particular kind of fiction?”

“Because I need to.”

“*Why do you need to?*”

If you follow the logic in the progression of these questions, if

you pay attention to the ferret that’s gnawing inside you, you’ll have a subject matter that’s your own. You’ll also approach your favorite type of story in a way that has special meaning to you. You’ll be an original and not an imitator. Because you’re